

Opinion – Populism as an Existential Threat in Israel

Written by Gideon Rahat

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GIDEON RAHAT, AUG 9 2023

It is common to argue that populism – with its anti-pluralist and anti-elite zeal – threatens liberal democracy. Yet, populism is also a threat to the health of the state itself as a successful populist regime is likely to produce a failed state. Liberal democracies have historically produced strong states because they contain a framework of regulated conflict between different worldviews, opinions, and interests. They are relatively stable thanks to the regulation of conflict, and thanks to their inclusiveness they are more capable of mobilizing their population and recruiting needed resources to sustain their strength. Yet, populists aspire for total uniformity, putting the people of the majority group (or alleged majority group) against minority groups and the elites.

In an effort to create uniformity, populists are ready to destroy the state. They demonize it and describe normal institutions with pejoratives such as the “deep state.” This deep state, controlled by the elites, is standing in the way of the people’s (that is, the real or alleged majority) plan to implement their program. We witnessed such attacks in the United States, Venezuela Hungary, and Brazil.

The current populist government in Israel would like to see itself as the most patriotic government that ever ruled Israel. In reality, it is a government whose policies are against the state of Israel in at least three ways. First, the government aims to destroy the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, the main characteristic of any functioning modern state. It attempts to divide the authority over the military (by appointing an additional minister that would have separate, specific military authorities), and to politicize the police, even creating an additional police force (a politicized “national guard” under the direct authority of the relevant minister). These are both moves that hurt the monopoly on force because they explicitly create two separate competing forces that claim to own the legitimate use of force at the same level of government.

Second, the government is promoting policies that contradict the principles on which the state of Israel was established. The Israeli Declaration of Independence states that Israel “will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

Instead of adopting these democratic principles as its guiding document, the populist government promotes policies and laws that go against its democratic spirit: from going after the court system that guards people’s rights and freedoms to initiatives that will hurt various freedoms that are spelled in the declaration. Limiting the courts’ ability to check the executive branch (by the recent law that abolished the use of the claim for “reasonableness”) means that citizens have less protection against the arbitrary decision of the government.

Third, it is attacking the institutions of the state, including the professional elements in Israel’s public administration, the judicial advisors, the Central Bank, the police and the military, and the judicial system. It is also attacking non-state institutions that make up the mind and spirit of the state, such as academic and cultural institutions. And, of course, the media is under attack, especially the parts embodying the ethos of truth and criticism that empower the state to improve by bringing light to its faults.

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It might surprise many people that leaders who have claimed they would make their countries great again are, in fact, a threat to them, but indeed, this is the case. What is a state if not its monopoly on the legitimate use of force, its values, and its institutions? The current Israeli case should serve as a warning sign to patriots worldwide. Populism is not about love for the state; it is an expression of hate for it. And by undermining its own institutions, populist leaders threaten not only liberal democracy, but the state itself.

People must actively avoid the temptation to support the destruction of their state. The destruction of political institutions far too often results in crime, corruption, social polarization, and individual and economic insecurity. What follows is the unfortunate but perhaps inevitable reality of the failed state, which is the attempt to create order through a dictatorship. People who find fault in their systems should improve them from the inside, not destroy them. Improvements in the rules of the game, of the constitutional principles, should be done carefully with broad consent. In most democratic countries, such changes indeed require wide consent. In Israel, unfortunately, such changes are easy to promote. This was not really a problem until lately, until a populist government decided to take advantage of this weakness.

Those who “razed the old world to the ground” from the left and from the right created chaos and suffering. Those who improved it, step by step, respecting the rules of the game, have done much better.

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